

Money calls for bushmeat in spite of Ebola

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The most recent Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak, which emerged in March 2014 in West Africa, has been the largest one since the discovery of the Ebola virus in 1976. EVD is introduced into the human population when the first patient becomes infected through direct contact with the blood or bodily fluids (e.g. urine, sweat and saliva) of an infected wild animal, such as a fruit bat, forest antelopes or primates. In tropical areas, where it is common for people to consume bushmeat (i.e. meat from wild animals), humans may come into contact with infected animals while hunting or handling the meat, giving an opportunity for the virus to leap over and spread rapidly from person to person.

Bushmeat often represents a primary source of animal protein and a source of cash-income for tropical forest dwellers, and its over-harvest is well-known to be a major biodiversity threat; hence, its consumption is a matter of concern for several reasons. Due to the link between bushmeat and EVD, it is likely that local attitudes toward bushmeat consumption changed in response to the outbreak. It is also likely that this change was influenced by different socio-economic factors. I investigated the influence of income, education, and literacy, on changes in bushmeat consumption, as well as complementary changes in daily meal frequency, diversity of food items, and bushmeat species preference, during the Ebola crisis in Liberia in 2015. To test for potential relationships, I statistically analysed interview data that were collected from two nationwide surveys of rural and urban households; the first survey was conducted before the Ebola crisis, between 2010 and 2012, and a follow-up survey was conducted during the crisis, in 2015

I found an overall decrease in the consumption of bushmeat during the crisis; however, the consumption of bushmeat of wealthy households decreased less than the consumption of poor households. Daily meal frequency decreased during the Ebola crisis regardless of income, literacy and education level, and the diversity of food items and preferences for bushmeat species stayed the same during the crisis. Furthermore, my findings indicate that fish is an important substitute for bushmeat in Liberia.

Although the decrease in bushmeat consumption linked to the EVD outbreak may have temporarily benefitted vulnerable wildlife populations, this should not promote the use of fear for the disease as strategy to protect wildlife. Conservation biologists should instead focus on developing strategies that are compatible with food security and human livelihoods, such as providing alternative protein and income sources that are sustainable.

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